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AUTHOR Saka, Paul
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ABSTRACT

The two major schools of thought concerned with the meaning of proper names, i.e., the direct-reference or referrential/causal theory, and the description theory, are outlined, and new arguments are presented for a strong version of the second of these theories. The referential theory takes the meaning of the name as being the same as its referent. Four classical problems associated with this approach are identified. The description theory holds, generally, that names are semantically equivalent to descriptions. The chief problem seen in this approach is the modal argument. The causal theory says that the meaning of a name somehow involves the causal chain that connects the current use of the name to earlier uses of it, ultimately going back to some original ostension. This is seen as a sophisticated version of the referential theory. This theory is also seen as having some problems. Elaborations of the description theory are not satisfactory. New arguments against the nominal-description theory are presented, including the distinctions between proper and common names and between vagueness and ambiguity in shared names. These arguments are seen as making the complete-description theory more plausible. In support of this thesis, it is proposed that names, like pronouns, take only wide scope. (MSE)

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The Meaning of Proper Names

Paul Saka
University of Arizona

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Introduction

Concerning the meaning of proper names, there are two major schools of thought: the direct-reference or referential/causal theory, and the description theory. First I shall trace the dialectic between the two and then I shall give new arguments for a strong version of the description theory.

Move 1: The Referential Theory

The naive version of the referential/causal theory simply took the meaning of a name N as N, the referent of N. The appeal of this theory is its simplicity. The one argument for it is due to J.S. Mill (1843). According to Mill, the meaning of a name is not a concept but a referent because "The sun causes heat" is true while "The concept of the sun causes the concept of heat" is false.

The referential theory runs into four classical problems. First, identity statements can be informative. Since "The Morning Star is the Evening Star" signifies more than "Venus is Venus", terms like Morning Star, Evening Star, and Venus must mean more than their referent. Second, coreferential terms are not interchangeable in opaque contexts. Thus, one might believe that the Morning Star is a planet while not believing that the Evening Star is. Again, this shows that names have more significance than just indicating a referent. Third, non-referring or "vacuous" names can yet be meaningful, as in "Dr Moriarty met Sherlock Holmes". Fourth, negative existentials are not contradictory ("Santa Claus does not exist") and positive existentials are not tautological ("Gödel exists").[1]

Move 2: The Description Theory

Due to the problems with the referential theory, Russell (1918) proposed that names do not correspond to logical constants but rather to predicates embedded within a quantificational structure of definiteness. The logical form of "Aristophanes has feathers" is not Fa but rather:

(1) $(\exists x)\ (Ax \ \&\ Fx \ \&\ [\forall y][Ay \rightarrow x=y])$

(In other words, there is exactly one x such that it is Aristophanes; and it has feathers). Let me emphasize right here that one needn't buy Russell's theory of definite descriptions in order to accept the basic idea that names are not "empty" but rather are semantically equivalent to descriptions.

Unfortunately, the description theory seems to encounter difficulties of its own. The chief problem is the modal argument

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(Kripke 1972). If, say, Thomas Jefferson means "the writer of the Declaration of Independence" then (2) should be equivalent to (3).

(2) The writer of the Declaration of Independence necessarily wrote the Declaration of Independence.

(3) Thomas Jefferson necessarily wrote the Declaration of Independence.

But since (2) is true and (3) is false, the description theory is widely pooh-poohed (for example, by Kripke 1972, Putnam 1975, Evans 1979, Salmon 1986).

Move 3: The Causal Theory

The causal theory says that the meaning of a name N somehow involves the causal chain that connects the current use of N to earlier uses of N, ultimately going back to some original ostension. Because the causal theory crucially invokes the idea of original ostension, it can be seen as a sophisticated version of the referential theory. Yet because of the added apparatus of the causal chain, causal-theorists have a chance of making their theory avoid the classical problems concerning identity statements, belief contexts, vacuous names, and existential claims.

However, the causal theory too faces a couple of problems. First, it has yet to be worked out in a detailed enough way to test; there is still room to doubt whether it can in fact overcome the four classical problems. More importantly, the causal theory doesn't explain how it is that speakers can actually use names. On the one hand, if the causal history of a name isn't available to the mind, it's hard to see how the mind can intelligibly use that name. On the other hand, if causal histories are cognitively available, then it's hard to see how the causal theory contradicts the description theory.

Move 4: Elaborations of the Description Theory

In saying that a name is a "disguised definite description", Russell remained vague on the exact nature of the description. The description theory has been fleshed out in several different ways: as the complete-description theory, as the arbitrary-description theory, as the cluster-description theory, and as the nominal-description theory.

The complete-description theory, so far as I can tell, has been espoused only by Jespersen (1924). It states:

> If N is a name for N in S's vocabulary, then N is semantically equivalent in S's idiolect to the conjuction of every property that S attributes to N.

This is the theory that I shall be arguing for in the next couple of sections.

The arbitrary-description theory is what Frege (1892) seems to have in mind. The arbitrary-description and complete-description theories both seem to be vulnerable to the modal argument, but in the latter case the vulnerability is only illusory, as I shall argue in the following section.

The remaining theories don't have any trouble at all with the modal argument. The cluster theory (Searle 1969) is similar to the complete-description theory with one important exception. It says that the conjoined properties that make up a description are not

all necessary. The major problem here is that, like the causal theory, the cluster theory is vague. If none of the properties are necessary, then why have them at all? Searle talks about "weighting" them, but this notion of weight remains mysterious.

The nominal-description theory takes the meaning of a name N as "the bearer of N".[2] One argument for this is that every proper name N corresponds to a common noun N which means precisely "bearers of N":

(4) There are 25 Franklins in the local phonebook.

Another argument is that "An object could be a dog even if the word 'dog' were never used as a symbol. But an object could not be a Jones unless someone used 'Jones' as a name" (Burge 1973: 430). Roughly speaking, adherents include not only Burge 1973, but also Russell 1919:174 (tentatively), Sloat 1969, Algeo 1973: 69, Loar 1976:135, and most notably Bach 1987.

Move 5: The Ambiguity of Names

So much for review of the literature. At this point I would like to carry the dialectic forward. To begin with, I wish to present new evidence against the nominal-description theory.

My first argument crucially depends on distinguishing proper names from common names.[3] A proper name is always definite; and in English it occurs without a quantifier (without a numeral, determiner, or plural suffix). A common noun is always indefinite; and it may occur with or without a quantifier. If it is in the singular, a common name generally requires the indefinite article ("I know a Kerry" = I know a person named Kerry). The exception is where the common name appears as a predicate. Thus, (5) is ambiguous:

(5) This is Kerry.

If Kerry is serving as a proper name, then the speaker is informing you that this person is identical to some definite, previously discussed person. If Kerry is serving as a common name, then the speaker is simply saying, "This person is named Kerry."

The point of all this is that -- if we restrict ourselves to proper names -- names aren't equivalent to their nominal descriptions; (6) is grammatical but (7) is not.

(6) The second queen of England was the bearer of Elizabeth and the sixth queen of England is the bearer of Elizabeth.

(7) *The second queen of England was Elizabeth and the sixth queen of England is Elizabeth.

(7) works only when we construe Elizabeth as a common name.

My second argument centers on the ambiguity/vagueness distinction. The nominal-description theory entails that shared names are vague, not ambiguous. There is a single name Franklin that is equivalent to a single concept "the bearer of Franklin", which applies to innumerable individuals; there is not a distinct concept for each bearer of the name. This consequence seems to be a good thing to nominal-description theorists. For example, Algeo (1972) says:

> If we say that homonymy is involved, we will be forced to conclude that there are as many different words John as there are or have been or will be persons bearing the name... This position makes the vocabulary infinte and

thus in principle indescribable... It is as though we should say iris has... as many senses as there are individual flowers of the family Iridaceae. [45]

To this I have a couple of responses. First, the ambiguity thesis entails not an infinite number of homonyms, but rather an indefinitely large finite number. This is an important distinction, for finite inventories, no matter how indefinitely large, are always describable in principle. In practice, no individual could ever describe the collective vocabulary of everyone who speaks a given language; but that is beside the point, for no individual would ever be in command of the collective vocabulary.

Second, the best way to decide whether names are ambiguous is by subjecting them to tests that usually work for common vocabulary. A test for distinguishing between ambiguity and vagueness comes from George Lakoff (1970). In an elliptical construction, an ambiguous common noun phrase allows just two interpretations:

(8) Jan found a bug in the desk and Kelly did too =>
Jan found a pest and Kelly found a pest;
Jan found a microphone and Kelly found a microphone;
*Jan found a microphone and Kelly found a pest;
*Jan found a pest and Kelly found a microphone.

This shows that bug is ambiguous; not only does it vaguely refer to many different individual entities, but there are two underlying concepts. In contrast, vague terms allow crossed interpretations:

(9) Jan owns a dog and Kelly does too =>
Jan owns a collie and Kelly owns a collie;
Jan owns a terrier and Kelly owns a terrier;
Jan owns a collie and Kelly owns a terrier;
Jan owns a terrier and Kelly owns a collie.

My thesis is that proper names pattern like ambiguous terms:

(10) *Shakespeare performed for Elizabeth, and Lennon did too.
(11) *Plato personally knew Aristotle and Jackie Onassis did too.

Given common cultural knowledge, the natural interpretation is that Shakespeare performed for Queen Elizabeth I and that Lennon performed for Queen Elizabeth II. However, such a crossed interpretation of the elliptical sentence (10) is impossible.

The ambiguity test as applied to the common nouns in (8, 9) involved indefinite constructions. Yet the nominal-description theory claims that the meaning of a proper name is equivalent to a definite description. Therefore I need to show that the ambiguity test also works for definite descriptions, specifically for "the bearer of N". It's hard to find a stylistically felicitous context, but I think the following will do. Suppose we know that the first-place winner of some lottery is Edgar Jones and that the second-place winner is Edmond Smith. Then (12) is possible:

(12) The first-place winner is the bearer of Ed and the second-place winner is too.

However, under the same conditions (13) is impossible:

(13) *The first-place winner is Ed and the second-place winner is too.

Again, the relevant reading is where Ed is a proper name.

Conclusion

My negative arguments against the nominal-description theory make its competitor the complete-description theory more plausible. Now I would like to end by giving a constructive argument in support of the latter theory.

The challenge for the complete-description theory is to overcome the modal argument. One way is to postulate that names must take wide scope.[4] This analysis gains considerable appeal in light of how other terms behave. To begin with, pronouns always take wide scope. For example, "She's necessarily female" means only (14) and not (15):

(14) (∃x: x a salient female) □ (x is female)
(15) □ (∃x: x a salient female) (x is female)

Likewise, pronouns take only wide scope with respect to negation, in contrast to the behavior of common noun phrases. "The King of France isn't bald" is ambiguous between wide-scope negation (it's not the case that there is a king of France who is bald) and narrow-scope negation (There is a king of France, and he is not bald). But the analogous pronominalized case "He isn't bald" permits only (16):

(16) (∃x: x a salient male) -(x is bald)
(17) -(∃x: x a salient male) (x is bald)

"He isn't bald" can mean only that (16) there is some salient male who is not bald, and not (17) there is no salient male who is bald.

The fact that pronouns take only wide scope is especially persuasive to my thesis -- that names too take only wide scope -- because names and pronouns are syntactically similar: neither one belongs to the category Noun; they are Noun Phrases, as indicated by the fact that they don't take determiners or adjectives.

My thesis that certain kinds of words are limited in the scope that they can take gains yet more plausibility in light of certain quantifiers and modals. First, while <u>every</u> can take either scope ("A girl kissed every boy"), <u>all</u> in object position requires narrow scope ("A girl kissed all [the] boys"). Second, <u>must</u> always takes wide scope over negation, whereas <u>need</u> always takes narrow scope ("Jan must not go" versus "Jan need not go").

Notes

1. The literature is replete with expositions of these four problems. See, for instance, Bach 1987:94f; Devitt & Sterelny 1987:section 2.5; Hookway 1987:11f; Linsky 1983: xxvif; Cooper 1973:72ff; Searle 1969:164; Sorensen 1963: section 3; and Russell 1905.

2. The label "nominal-description theory" is due to Bach 1987. The same theory has been called the "so-und-so Genanntsein" theory by others (see Sorensen 1963: ch 2). I prefer Bach's term because it is English and because Bach is the one who has given the most sustained and sophisticated argument for it.

3. My first argument does not apply to Burge's version of the nominal-description theory because -- while he takes names as nominal descriptions -- Burge takes names as equivalent to irreducible predicates; they do not translate to the explicit description exactly.

4. Another way is to say that, with names, narrow scope has the same semantic effect as wide scope (Bach 1987:144ff).

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